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Fearful that he might be seen panicking his reasoning. He planned to hurry south along the foothills until opposite the forest town and then turn over to it. If he approached from such a direction no one would guess his original starting place. He knew of an untiring water hole two days' journey from the canyon. This water hole was far out of his way, but his cautious supply would more than last till he reached it.

Then fate, the fate that had dogged his every step since first he ventured into the solitude, closed up and crept at his heels. He became more morose and strangely fearful. His vision, reined by the waiting of his body, created shadows that lay about his feet like malignant pools, shadows where no shadows should be.

Outwardly he was calm as he crossed the arroyo. The cañon, slung over his shoulder, struck a sharp point of rock that started one of the seams. His back was infinitesimal. The fall of the cañon absorbed the drip which evaporated. When he arrived at the water hole that was dry. His cañon felt strangely light. He could not remember having used so much water. He changed his plan. He struck straight from the hills toward the railroad. He knew that eventually he would, as he journeyed west, cross it perhaps near a water tank.

Toward the blinding afternoon of that day he saw strange lakes and wide spread out upon the distant sand and inverted mountain ranges stretching to the horizon.

Fate crept closer to his heels, waiting with the dumb patience of the desert to claim the struggling, impatient puppet whose little day was all spent.

"He stumbled across the blazing bars of steel that marked the railroad. His empty cañon clattered on the ties he felt. He got to his knees and drank himself from the track. He lay, all for he had thirsted. With this one, he would not be run over by the train. He lay limp, wasted, scarcely breathing.

CHAPTER II.
Naked Romance.

At the wide gate of the mountain ranch stood the girl. Her black saddle pony Boyer trotted to be away. Glancing back through the cavernous shade of the live oaks, the girl hesitated before opening the gate. A little breeze waylaid through the mountain canyon and on up to the mountain ranch, touched the girl's cheek, and she breathed deeply of its cool fragrance.

The wide gate swung open and Louise Lacharme, curbing Black Boyer, rode out of the shadows into the hot light of the morning, singing as she rode.

The girl's eyes, the color of sea water in the sun, were leveled toward the distant hills across the San Fernando valley. From her fingers dangled the long bridle reins. Her lips were gently parted. Her gaze was the gaze of one who dreams in the daylight. And also in the hidden meadow crouched Romance, Romance ragged, unkempt, jaunty.

Boyer first scented the wood smoke. Louise noticed his forward standing ears and his snorting. Immediately, as though he was the low rounded rock, a throne of dreams that she had graced before. From down the slope and along hidden by the bulk of the rock a thin brand of smoke stood up in the still air, to break at last into tiny clouds and curls of nothingness.

"It can't be much of a fire yet!" exclaimed Louise, forever watchful, as are all the hill folk, for that dread, ungovernable red monster of destruction, a mountain fire. "It can't be much of a fire yet."

The pony Boyer, delicately scenting something more than wood smoke, snorted and swerved. Louise dismounted and stepped hurriedly round the shoulder of the rock. A bright, heated face confronted her. "No, it ain't much of a fire yet, but our hired girl she joined a movie picture outfit, so we two be things are doin' the best we can chasin' a breakfast." And the tramp, Overland Red, ragged, unkempt, jocular, rose from his knees beside a tiny blaze. He pulled a bleak flop of felt from his tangled hair in an overcastured bow of welcome.

"We offer you the freedom of the city, ma'am. Welcome to our midst and kindly excuse appearances this morning. Our trunks got delayed in New York."

Unsmilingly the girl's level gray eyes studied the tramp's face. Then her glance swept him swiftly from head to head to his feet. "I was just making up my mind whether I'd stay and talk with you or ask you to put out your fire and go somewhere else. But I think you are all right. Please put on your hat."

Overland Red's self assurance shrank a little. The girl's eyes were direct and fearless, yet not altogether unfriendly. He thought that deep within them dwelt a smile.

"You got my map all right," he said, a trifle more respectfully. "Course we'll doze the fire when we duck out of here. But what do you think of Collie here, my pal? Is he all right?"

"Oh, he's only a boy," said Louise, glancing casually at the youth crouched above the fire.

The boy, a slim lad of sixteen or thereabouts, flushed beneath the battered brim of his black felt hat. He watched the tomato can coqueted instantly. Louise could not see his face.

"Yes, mine, I'm all right and so is he." And a humorous wistfulness crept into the tramp's eyes. "He's what you might call a changeling."

"Changeling?"

"Umh! Always changin' around from place to place when you're young. Ain't that it?"

"Oh! And when you are older?" she queried, smiling.

Overland Red frowned. "Oh, then you're just a tramp, a Willie, a Bo, a hobo."

He saw the girl's eyes harden a little. He spoke quickly and she imagined truthfully. "I worked ten years for one outfit once without a change. And I never knowed what it was to do a day's work out of the saddle. You know what that means."

"Mineral labor? What, mining?" asked Louise.

"No, not mining. Jest mineral labor like Japs or section hands or coachmen."

"Well, yes. It's all the same, anyway. I never do no hair splittin' on words. Bein' a pote myself it ain't necessary."

"A—A pote! Really?"

"Really and truly and carry one and add five. I've rode a lot of potry in my time, miss. Say, are we campin' on your land?"

"No. This is government land, from here to our line up above the Moonstone rancho."

"The Moonstone rancho?" queried Overland Red, breaking a twig and feeding the fire.

"Yes. It's named after the canyon. But don't let me keep you from breakfast."

"Breakfast, eh? That's right! I almost forgot it, talkin' to you. Collie's got the coffee to bollin'. No, you ain't keepin' us from our breakfast any that you'd notice. It would take a whole regiment of rurales to keep us from a breakfast if we seen one runnin' around loose without its pe or ma."

Louise Lacharme did not smile. This was too real. Here was adventure with no moonstone's glamour, no bookish gloss. Here was romance—romance unshaven, illiterate, with its coat of making coffee in a smoke blackened tomato can, but romance nevertheless.

That this romance should touch her life Louise had not the faintest dream. She was alone—but, pshaw! Boyer was grazing near, and, besides she was not really afraid of the men. She thought she rather liked them or, more particularly, the boisterous one who had said his name was Overland Red.

The tramp gazed at her a moment before he lifted the tomato can to the embers. "We know you won't join us, but we're goin' to give you the invite just the same. And we mean it. Ma'am, if you'll be so kind as to draw up your chair, us gents 'll eat."

"Thank you," said Louise, and Overland's face brightened at the good fellowship in her voice. "Thank you both, but I've had breakfast."

She gazed at the solitary, bubbling tomato can coqueted of "second edition" coffee. There was nothing else to grace the board, or rather rock. "I'll be right back," she said. "I'll just take off Boyer's bridle. Here, boy!" she called. "You'll be able to eat better."

And she ran to the pony. From a saddle pocket she took her own lunch of sandwiches and ripe olives wrapped in oiled paper. She delayed her return to loosen the forward cinch of the saddle and to find the little stock of cigarette papers and tobacco that she carried for any chance rider of the Moonstone who might be without them.

Collie, the boy tramp, glanced up at Overland Red. "I guess she's gone," he said regretfully.

"You're nutty, Collie. She ain't the kind to sneak off after sayin' she's comin' back. I know a hobo and a real woman when I see 'em. I was raised in the west myself."

The boy Collie was young, sensitive, and he had not been "raised in the west." He frowned. "Yes, you was raised in the west, and what you got to show for it?"

"Well, hear the kid!" exclaimed Overland. "Out of the mouth of babes and saplings! What have I got to show? What have I—Wha—Oh, you go chase a snake! I know a good hobo and a good woman when I see 'em, and I seen 'em this mornin'."

"But what do she want with us boys?" asked the boy.

"S-s-h-h! Why, she's interested in me romantic past, of course. Ain't I the cute little gopher when it comes to the ladies? Fan me, Collie, and slow music and a beer for one, I'm some lady's man, sister!"

"You're a Bo, the same as me," said the boy.

"S-s-h-h! For the love of Pete, don't you handle that word 'Bo' so careless. It's loaded. It has a jarrin' effect on ears unaccustomed—er—meanin' ears that ain't keyed up to it, as the pote says. She's comin' back. Fold your napkin. Don't look so blame hungry! Ain't you got any style?"

"She's the prettiest girl I ever seen," said the boy, hastily swallowing his share of the hot, insipid coffee.

"Fraty!" whispered Overland as Louise approached. "She's thoroughbred! Did you see them eyes? Afraid of nothin' and smilin' at what might dash to scare her. Not foolish, either. She's wise. And she's kind and laughin' and not ashamed to talk to us. That's thoroughbred."

Around the rock came Louise, the neat package of sandwiches in one hand. In the other was the tobacco and cigarette papers. "I'm going to have my luncheon," she said. "If you won't object I'll take a sandwich. There, I have mine. The rest are for you."

"We had our breakfast," said Overland quickly, "when you was talkin' to your pony."

Louise glanced at the empty tomato can. "Well, I'll excuse you for not waiting for me, but I shall not excuse you from having luncheon with me. I made these sandwiches myself. Have one. They're really good."

"Oh!" groaned Overland, grimacing. "If I could carry up my language smooth like that I-I guess I'd get deaf listenin' to myself talk. You said that speech like takin' two turns around the hand stand tryin' to catch yourself and then climbin' a post and steppin' on your own shoulders so you could see the parade down the street. Do you get that?"

And he sighed heavily. "Say, these here sandwiches is great!"

"Will you have one?" asked Louise, gracefully proffering the olives.

"Seem! It's you. Thanks. I always take two, the second one for a chaser to kill the taste of the first. It's the only way to eat 'em—if you know where to stop. They do taste like something you done and are sorry for afterwards, don't they?"

"Were you ever sorry for anything?" asked the boy, feeling a little piqued that he had been left out of the conversation.

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